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ABSTRACT

Composition instructors and their women students stand to lose a great deal should they not continue to explore the "different voice" that women have despite influences of the dominant culture. Carol Gilligan has recently been taken to task by any number of feminist scholars for what they understand to be her tendency to essentialize the differences between the genders at the expense of the role that culture plays in defining gender. But these scholars misunderstand Gilligan's purpose and furthermore fail to see her seminal work, "In a Different Voice," in the context of her later studies which reinforce yet modify her initial views. Significantly, Gilligan has never pretended that the "different" voice speaks for all women or that it was her goal to prove that it does. Her point was simply that research hitherto has not taken into account the difference between a man's and a woman's voice, particularly in issues of moral judgment. In "Meeting at the Crossroads," Gilligan's most recent book (written with Lynn Brown), she explicitly illustrates the role that race, ethnicity, class and family play in the psychological development of girls. At the same time, however, she shows that girls from a variety of cultures and backgrounds lose their authentic voice as they enter adolescence. Silenced by the dominant culture, they develop fraudulent selves. (Contains 53 references.) (TB)

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Gilligan's "Different Voice" Theory: A Just Cause for Composition Inquiry or Just Another Conceptual Bandwagon?

Last fall when a younger female colleague vehemently disagreed with Carol Gilligan's "different voice" theory and other women's cognition theories, I was surprised. We come from similar backgrounds: we are white, heterosexual, middle-class urbanites who teach composition at the same university, where we are graduate students. Whereas I rejoiced when I first read Gilligan's book In A Different Voice, finding explanations for my unarticulated discomfort with public discourse, my colleague said the "different voice" sounded false to her. How differently we must have experienced our womanhood, I thought.

That was precisely her point, I later learned while reading her position paper on the issue. Gender differences in behavior and images of self, she argued, are social, cultural constructions, so the notion of women's cognition is a fantasy, impossible to prove empirically. There are just too many different societies, cultures, and subcultures to definitively establish differences in the cognitive processes of men and women. Arguing for women's cognition means ignoring the individual differences of women, and it fails to recognize the importance of race, class, and culture in our development. On one level I knew that what she said was true: I expected us to agree on the issue because we were

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both feminists and women, so I had failed to recognize the differences between us.

Since then, I have discovered that the theoretical rift between us reflects the central arguments dividing many psychologists, social scientists, and feminists when the subject of Gilligan's theory arises. Since her landmark book was published in 1982, numerous scholars have challenged the theory's research foundation (e.g., Colby and Damon, Greeno and Maccoby, Luria, Meagher, Mednick, Nails, and Vasudev), questioning the studies' research design, the size and makeup of their subject samples, and their use of narrative-interpretative methods in gathering and analyzing evidence. More recently, Gilligan's critics have attacked what they see as the essentialism underlying her theory.

One of Gilligan's most persuasive critics, Martha Mednick of Howard University, for example, argues in American Psychologist that Gilligan's theory is a prime example of a popular, but empirically unproven "conceptual bandwagon" that is stifling legitimate scholarship and hurting the cause of women. Explaining why the theory appeals to us intuitively, she argues that it reiterates stereotypes congruent with our cultural belief in sex differences. Quoting Simone de Beauvoir's 1984 observations about the "new femininity," Mednick found that theories positing women's difference are dangerous because they reinforce the idea of women as the "other," the "second sex" (1123). In addition, she warns that arguing for women's difference with its emphasis on

individual nature, biology, and responsibility aids social conservatives and rightist political agendas (1122). Finally, she argues, these theories have encouraged a "personal development trend" that has diverted public and scholarly resources away from studying "the social foundations of power alignments and inequity" (1122).

Although Gilligan's "different voice" theory has been and remains influential in our field, several compositionists have become embroiled in the essentialism debate over research into women's ways of knowing and composing. In 1990, Joy S. Ritchie published a plea for tolerance in her essay "Confronting the 'Essential Problem," in which she identified the division between feminist theorists who were trying to get a "'fix' on abstract theories of gender construction" and feminist teachers who were exploring the "immediate implications of these theories for the lives of women students" (249). This past year at least two composition journals have published essays that demonstrate the divisiveness of this issue. Both essays accuse feminist compositionists of glossing over the issue and ignoring the implications of their theories and practices. Both specifically charge these compositionists with perpetuating a dichotomous, gender-based orthodoxy in composition studies that may be just as limiting, silencing, and unfair as the orthodoxy they challenge.

For many of the reasons these scholars articulate so well, I agree that we need to become better informed about

Gilligan's theory in order to avoid over-simplified appropriations. I disagree, however, that we should abandon the "different voice" theory as an unproven "conceptual bandwagon."

First, much if not all of the criticism is based on the research reported in In A Different Voice, an early work that tells only part of the story. A prolific writer, Gilligan published individually and with colleagues numerous books and papers that expand upon, update, confirm, and in the case of later works sometimes correct the weaknesses of the research reported in the landmark book. Among these works are three books -- Mapping the Moral Domain, Making Connections, and Meeting at the Crossroads, all reporting on studies conducted to explore specific hypotheses generated by the "different voice" theory. These works report on research that has refined but consistently upheld the theory, traceable through the voices of girls and boys, men and women from diverse cultures.

Second, the question of whether Gilligan has proven the theory empirically ultimately strikes me as futile and irrelevant when her research goals are considered. While her critics can cite a litany of research studies that allegedly disprove her theory, she and independent researchers can likewise cite numerous confirmatory studies. Significantly, Gilligan has never pretended that the "different" voice speaks for all women or that it was her goal to prove that it does. As she explains in the book's introduction, she wanted

to expose the wrongful omission of women's voices in psychological accounts of human development and, thereby, "provide a basis upon which to generate theory, potentially yielding a more encompassing view of the lives of both sexes" (4). To fulfill these goals she has rightly argued, she need only give one example to prove the existence of the different, care-focused voice and she need only give a series of examples to prove that a common theme exists in women's conceptions of self and morality. She does this repeatedly, in the 1982 book and subsequent works. As she has noted on several occasions, we should read the "different voice" work as "research in progress."

As a feminist composition teacher at a university with a multiculturally diverse student body, therefore, I am far more disturbed by the essentialism debate and its implications for our field's continued research into women's ways of knowing and composing. As I reconsidered Gilligan's work in light of this issue, I once again found myself questioning the critics' assumptions and evidence. Gilligan, for example, has repeatedly demonstrated that she and her colleagues are not indifferent to the differences among girls and women and the role that society and culture play in their development. First, the introduction to <u>In a Different Voice</u> explicitly cautions readers not to assign a gender to the different voice but to regard it as a theme because the different voice is not absolutely associated with gender. In contrasting male and female voices, she explains, she

intended "to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex" (2).

Second, Gilligan and her associates have demonstrated elsewhere, particularly in recent research, that they are not oblivious to the role that culture may play in human development. Since 1981, Gilligan and her associates have studied subjects in a variety of cultures. For example, they have studied children at a suburban public school and youngsters from three ethnically diverse neighborhoods; they have interviewed high school students at inner city, suburban public and private schools; and they have worked with teens involved in pregnancy prevention programs. In addition, they have studied various adult populations including mothers, physicians, and women lawyers. Consistently these studies have confirmed and refined the "different voice" theory. The urban youth study, for example, found that culture can be "a salient component" of moral development, but it also found that the teens from low-income cultures shared similarities with their more privileged counterparts, not only in expressing similar moral language and logic but also in revealing similar patterns of gender difference in moral orientation (Gilligan, Ward, and Taylor 173).

The most recent work, Meeting at the Crossroads, by Lyn Brown and Gilligan, most explicitly addresses and illustrates the role that race, ethnicity, class, and family play not only in the psychological development of girls under study

but also in their relationships with each other, their teachers, and the researchers. This book, which gives an in-depth look at a five-year study involving nearly 100 schoolgirls, offers perhaps the most compelling reasons for our continued consideration of Gilligan's theory and research.

Focused on the vignettes of a handful of girls from diverse cultural backgrounds, this book all too vividly and often illustrates through the girls' loss of a firm sense of self and authentic voice as they move from childhood into adolescence. As the researchers tell and interpret the girls' stories, they provide glimpses into the personal, social, and cultural forces at play in the girls' evolving concepts of themselves and relationships. As they do, they shed insight into why they and the women in their lives are silenced -- or silence themselves. For example, we meet Neeti, an outspoken child of Indian descent who muffled her authoritative voice as she entered adolescence and struggled to meet the conventional feminine ideal of the nice girl who never causes problems. At 12, she risked the wrath of a camp counselor by speaking in defense of a younger cousin; at 13 she felt trapped into befriending a girl she didn't like; at 14 she stopped speaking publicly -- and privately to the interviewer -- about "bad" feelings such as anger (201); at 15 she struggled in writing an essay answering the question, "Who Am I?", unhappy because she discovered a fraudulent self who had buried her real voice for the sake of phony

relationships (41). Others, also once sure in their knowledge and feelings as children, reveal similar transformations, adopting what might be called an adolescent amnesia, increasingly peppering the interviews with strings of "I don't Knows" as they grow older. Those most likely to resist pressures to silence their authentic voices were those "who, because of color or class, live in the margins" and "are so clearly at odds with the models of female beauty and perfection as to reveal the cultural hand behind the standards" (226).

Whether we like it or not, Brown and Gilligan have documented the presence of a relational self and moral voice that can be psychologically debilitating, especially for young and adult women struggling to meet the ideals established by the dominant culture. And whether we like it or not, Gilligan and her colleagues have shown that this relational self and moral orientation are often associated with girls and women. The problem, therefore, is not that gender differences do not exist or that Gilligan and her colleagues have posited an essentialist theory that may be misused or misrepresented. The problem is that women were once omitted from research in her field, and that omission led to human development models that valorized a male model of the psyche. As Gilligan, Brown and Annie Rogers have persuasively argued in "Psyche Embedded," to say that sex differences do not count in psychological development is to separate the psyche from the body, relationships, and a

culture, but to "embed Psyche in body means to give up the Platonic legacy of one pure form, along with its nemesis of endless relativism" (94). It means, they argue, that we must reformulate our ways of thinking about difference (91) rather than abandon gender research.

Gilligan's, Brown's, and Rogers' concerns remind me of an essay by Judith Stacey, another "different voice" critic. She deplores the theory's universalism but worries about the impact of post-modernist, anti-essentialist arguments on the women's cause. Reflecting on the "hostile" political conditions besetting feminists from within and without the academy, she pleads for tolerant ambivalence. We need, she says, "to foster diverse strands of outspokenness and keep the dialogues open. At a time like this, we should encourage multiple paths to resistance, rather than enjoining any" (545). In her plea, she voices a professional ethic that is contextual, connected, and caring, demonstrating the characteristics of the ethic identified by Gilligan as the "different voice."

When I reflect back on my conversation with my younger colleague, I recall that it ended in what might be called a "relational impasse" with one of us silencing herself in the wake of the other's unequivocal assertions. After reading Meeting at the Crossroads, I have begun to wonder what might be lost if we do not continue to draw from Gilligan's research for insight into the social and psychological dynamics behind our voices, especially the voices of those

who express or silence the "different" voice that has been associated with gender. As a composition teacher I particularly wonder how the relational self contributes to and complicates our students' interactions with each other and their teachers, in the classroom and their writing.

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